

EXCLUSIVE: Official report confirms mergers a farce

Forced council mergers have failed to deliver promised efficiency, savings and equality for ratepayers across merged council areas, a damning report by the NSW Auditor-General has found.

Auditor-General Margaret Crawford's report, obtained by The Weekly Times, has also found problems with poor community consultation, surplus staffing and service delivery in forced merger councils.

The report focused on the Inner West Council, the Snowy Monaro Council and Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council.

It justifies warnings about the impact of forced mergers raised in this newspaper by Hunters Hill Council and Lane Cove Council, which were targeted for a forced merger with the City of Ryde.

That plan was later scrapped by Premier Gladys Berejiklian, following legal action and community protests.

The protests warned City of Ryde would get preferential treatment to the two smaller neighbours and the Crawford Report has found that some merged council areas are serviced better than others.

"At the time of the

audit, different service levels inherited from the former councils mean that some ratepayers of the amalgamated council are receiving a higher level of service than others," Ms Crawford said.

The report blamed local government laws for "slowing progress towards an efficient

said.

Also in line with warnings from Hunters Hill and Lane Cove about communication with ratepayers, the audit found that merged councils need to review their service levels in consultation with communities to get the best and fairest outcome.

The report concludes

"At the time of the audit, different service levels inherited from the former councils mean that some ratepayers of the amalgamated council are receiving a higher level of service than others."

council structure" with restrictions on the ability of council to sack surplus staff, with ratepayers left to pick up the bill to employ staff they do not need.

"These protections have impacted upon councils' ability to plan for or realise benefits from amalgamation during the protection period," Ms Crawford

with a warning that inconsistent business processes prevent councils from achieving internal efficiencies while councils struggle to manage multiple complex and overlapping systems.

"Until systems and data are integrated, extra staff are also needed to perform some functions that require

the use of systems and data from the former councils," Ms Crawford said.

Expected savings in areas that include streamlined payrolls were also found to be inconsistent across council areas, with some staff paid weekly and others fortnightly.

If there is good news it is not being told by the forged merger councils.

"The Inner West Council and Snowy Monaro Regional Council have not been clearly linking their reform initiatives with expected savings and efficiencies in public reporting," the report notes.

Despite all three councils implementing change management programs for staff, they are nonetheless finding it "difficult to cope" with the changes, the audit says.

In their response to the audit, the Inner West Council blamed the State Government and said it "did not adequately prepare for amalgamations" and "forced" them upon the community.

